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The Medicare study of the cooperative health education project

Introduction

The Medicare study of the cooperative health education project was a randomized, controlled, prospective trial of self-care interventions offered for 1 year to the Medicare population of a health maintenance organization, the Rhode Island Group Health Association (RIGHA). The 1,009 eligible Medicare households in RIGHA were randomized to an experimental or a control group. The project was conducted by the Center for Consumer Health Education, and Don Vickery, M.D., was the principle investigator. The project officer was Shelagh Smith, Office of Research and Demonstrations.

Methodology

This project involved a written communications program in which experimental households received newsletters, reference books, and brochures on medical problems amenable to self-care techniques developed for use with populations of all age groups. The experimental households also received four newsletters and two self-care packages aimed at the specific health concerns of older Americans (such as foot problems and bowel function in the elderly). A telephone information system was available to the experimental group.

Utilization data obtained by health maintenance organization chart abstract were analyzed for 654 (64.8 percent) of the randomized households. The remaining households were excluded from analysis principally because they were not members of RIGHA for 6 months prior to and 6 months following their entry into the study. Post-test questionnaire data were obtained to provide information on demographic, socioeconomic, and health characteristics of participants.

Results

After adjustment by covariance for pretest utilization, total medical visits declined by 15.2 percent in the experimental group, compared with the control group. This

decrease was statistically significant ($p^*.013$). After adjustment by covariance for pretest utilization, visits for minor illnesses decreased by 15.9 percent in the experimental group, compared with the control group. This difference was not statistically significant ($p^*.018$).

It is estimated that the decrease in utilization could result in a savings of more than \$2 for every \$1 spent on the educational interventions.

Analysis by diagnostic category suggested that the impact of the self-care intervention was spread broadly among the categories. There was no evidence of negative outcomes as a result of the use of self-care.

The telephone information system was not utilized.

Response to the questionnaire was low. Although there were a few statistically significant differences in responses from the two groups, there were no conclusions of importance that could be made with confidence on the basis of the questionnaire data.

Conclusions

These findings suggest that Medicare beneficiaries respond to self-care interventions with a reduction in ambulatory utilization, that this response is appropriate, and that it does not involve increased risks to the beneficiaries. Together with other results of the project, these interventions appear to have a consistent and generalized effect of reducing ambulatory care utilization that is not limited to particular groups by age, minor illnesses, particular diagnostic category, or visits to a specific type of health care provider. Further investigation is needed to elucidate the processes by which these interventions influence utilization behavior.

Related publications

The final report entitled, "The Medicare Study of the Cooperative Health Education Project," is available only from the National Technical Information Service, Document Sales, 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, Va. 22151, (703) 487-4650, Accession Number PB85-173417IAS. The cost for the printed publication is \$14.50, or \$4.50 for microfiche. An article entitled, "Effect of Self-Care Education Programs on Medical Visits," was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 250, No. 21, Dec. 1983. Reprints of the article may be obtained upon request from Donald Vickery, M.D., The Center for Consumer Health Education, 1900 Association Drive, Reston, Va. 22091.

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